



Standing on Al Gore's Shoulders?

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Whatever we might think about Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth*, I'm glad it has settled one question: can a single film make a difference in tipping public opinion about a matter of global importance?



The answer, where climate change is concerned, is a resounding yes!

For sure, the film arrived at a time when the climate change debate had been going on for nearly two decades. Scientific evidence was mounting for human responsibility for accelerated changes in our climate. Political and business leaders, in denial for years, were finally beginning to take note -- perhaps sensing votes or dollars.

Coming in at the time it did -- in 2006 -- Al Gore's film tipped the public opinion to agree that climate change was for real and responses were urgently needed.

"It is now clear that we face a deepening global climate crisis that requires us to act boldly, quickly and wisely," says the former US Vice President introducing his film.

An Inconvenient Truth is not a particularly stunning or dramatic documentary. Some have called it a 'dramatised, long PowerPoint presentation' (although Gore actually uses Apple's Keynote presentation software). There aren't cuddly animals, deadly chemicals, forest infernos or gory animal hunts that make environmental films appeal to a mass audience.

In fact, it hangs together -- and sustains for nearly an hour and a half -- due to the sheer star power of Al Gore. And when we take a closer look, we see how hard Gore and his team at Participant Productions have tried to engage audiences.

Early on, they must have realised that facts, figures and analysis alone cannot engage a diverse, sometimes sceptical or indifferent audience. That's why they try a different approach: appealing to the emotions.

For example:

- Gore does not start off with any mind-boggling facts or figures. Instead, he sets the stage with a series of images of Earth in space, helping us to appreciate the beauty and fragility of our planet...now in distress.
- When he does mention some hard scientific data, Gore keeps it simple and interesting. An example: Showing a slide displaying two overlapping graphs representing carbon dioxide emissions and the average temperature going back 600,000 years, he says: "*When there is more carbon dioxide, the temperature gets warmer.*" He then gets on to a mechanical lift, presses a button and rises five feet above his stage -- to show how global temperatures will shoot literally 'off the chart' in the next 50 years.

But it's when Gore gets personal that he really reaches out.

He recalls spending summer vacations at the family's tobacco farm in Carthage, Tennessee. This was the time when evidence started emerging on the link between smoking cigarettes and lung cancer. Yet the Gore family stubbornly continued to grow tobacco. His own sister Nancy ('*my protector and friend at the same time*') took to smoking as a teenager and soon became addicted.

It was when she died of lung cancer at 46 that the family finally took note. As Gore recalls:

"My father had grown tobacco all his life. Whatever explanation that seemed to make sense in the past just didn't cut it anymore. He stopped."



Gore is not the first person to draw parallels between big tobacco and big oil. But he makes more than a scientific case here. By sharing his story of personal loss and anguish, he adds a human dimension to his facts, figures and rational arguments.

He relates the micro with macro, and the personal with global: "*It's human nature to take time to connect the dots. I know that. But I also know there can be a day of reckoning when you wish you had connected the dots more quickly.*"

It's not easy to connect the dots in a complex and nuanced phenomenon like climate change. Even when people finally make the connection, changing lifestyles will take more time and effort. It will also require many more moving images that appeal to their hearts and minds.

Other film-makers have started adopting a similar mix in their work. A good example is *The Great Warming*, a compelling, Canadian-made documentary also released in 2006. Narrated by actors Alanis Morissette and Keanu Reeves, it reveals how a changing climate is affecting the lives of people everywhere.

In fact, I find *The Great Warming*¹ a better made film. Using breathtaking visuals filmed in eight countries on three continents, it 'taps into the growing groundswell of public interest in this topic to

present an emotional, accurate picture of our children's planet'.

'Our children's planet' -- that's a simple yet powerful phrase which never fails to move sensible and sensitive people.

Sadly, it's precisely that kind of appeal to our hearts and emotions that

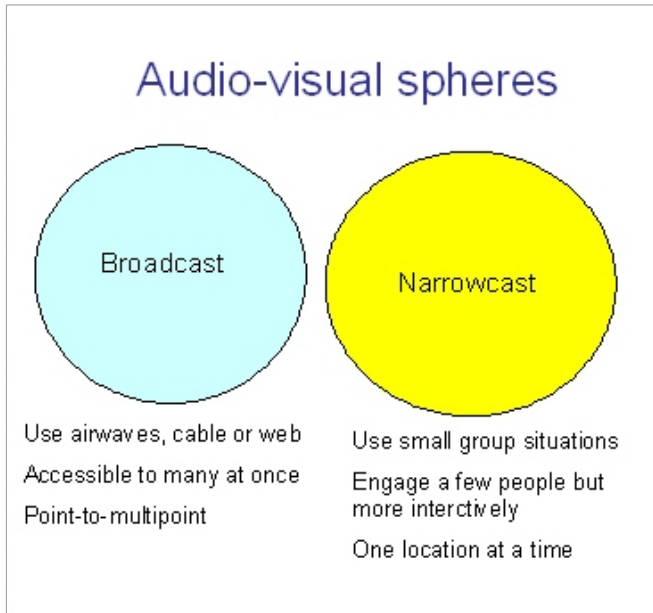
many climate change (and indeed, environmental) documentaries lack.

We often see environmental documentaries failing to engage audiences because they pack too much information, or worse, preach too heavily and directly. Some film-makers feel strongly that they must 'inform and educate' their viewers at all costs.



¹ <http://www.thegreatwarming.com>

They forget that we are first and last story-tellers. Bruce Moir, an experienced Australian film professional who has worked on our film projects, keeps reminding us: *"Our fundamental job is to tell a story -- one that holds an audience's interest and moves their heart, regardless of language, cultural context or subject....I have always believed that film achieves its optimal impact by aiming to 'get at the audience's head via their heart' rather than the other way around."*



Bruce says, and I agree, that film/video is not well suited for parting large volumes of information. But it's good at flagging issues and concerns to large number of people. This might sound superficial to some, but there's great value when this power is used well.

It's story telling that works best with moving images -- and what better stories to tell than the personalised ones of real people dealing with real world problems and challenges?

With 'moving images, moving people' as our slogan, we at TVE Asia Pacific believe in the power of well-made films to reach out to people's hearts and minds. We don't cover wildlife; instead, our focus is on life itself going wild...

Our experience shows that moving images can indeed move people, but only when:

- They are used in the right context;
- They form part of a bigger effort or campaign;
- Audio-visual's strengths are maximised; and
- Audio-visuals limitations are properly recognised.

It's the combination of broadcast and narrowcast spheres that has a better chance of changing people's attitudes and, ultimately, their behaviour.

Communicating for social change is a slow, incremental process that involves learning, understanding, participation and sharing. At TVE Asia Pacific, we work equally with broadcast, educational and civil society users of moving images. Our experience for over a decade shows that narrowcast work can reinforce and build on the initial broadcast outreach.

But that's where we all run into a major hurdle. To stand on Al Gore's shoulders, we must clear this one first.

Every year, excellent TV programmes or video films are made on various development topics. Public and private funds are invested in these, which draw on the creativity and labour of committed professionals.

These are typically aired once, twice or at best a few times and then relegated to the archives. Some may be released on DVD or adapted for online use. A majority will, however, be confined to the archival black holes from where they might never emerge again.

Yet most of these films have a long shelf-life -- and secondary uses outside the broadcast industry. They can be extremely useful material in education, awareness raising, advocacy and training work.

Alas, copyrights are often too tight for that to happen. Even when film-makers or producers themselves are keen for their creations to be used beyond broadcast, copyright policies of their companies get in the way. In large broadcast companies, it is now lawyers and accountants -- not journalists or producers -- who decide what kind of content is produced, and how it is distributed under which terms.

If the a/v media and the broadcast industry are to play a meaningful role against poverty, HIV, corruption and climate change, we need to break free from this crushing, outdated copyright mentality.

Two years ago, speaking at the United Nations headquarters, I called for poverty to be recognised as a copyright free zone. The idea was to have broadcasters and other electronic publishers release copyrights on TV, video and online content relating to poverty and development issues -- at least until (MDG target year of) 2015.²

The TV broadcast and film communities have reacted to this proposal with disdain or indifference, but I keep badgering on. I suggest that at this workshop, we call for climate change to be recognised as a copyright free zone. We need this sort of commitment from our own industry. Endlessly covering the climate change talks or airing an occasional documentary alone won't do.

We're not proposing to put film-makers or broadcasters out of business. But if moving images are to play a meaningful role in influencing how people and societies impact the global climate, we urgently need TV programmes and video films on the subject to be much more freely available, accessible and useable.

After all, there can be no intellectual property management on a dead planet...

² <http://www.tveap.org/index.php?q=node/290>